

Ida Cook - This Is Your Life

Filmed at the BBC's 'Television Theatre' (now the Shepherd's Bush Empire) & broadcast on Sunday March 11th 1956 at 7.45pm

Eamonn Andrews: [to the TV camera]

"Two writers were about to telerecord a talk on 'The Writing of Romantic Novels', when they were plunged into darkness. The lights had failed.

Hurried rearrangements were made and they are now, at this moment, being driven round to another studio. The door to that 'other studio' is also the side door to this theatre!

At any moment now they will walk on to our state here ready to restart their talk.

Who are they? They are Nancy Spain and Miss Mary Burchell.

The friends of one of these ladies are hidden away at the back of our stage, and you and I will, if our timing and cueing has been correct, see the final signal which will bring our guests among us. There it is.

They are in the theatre. Just a short flight of steps and they'll be on the stage.

Watch for them now.

Here they are - Miss Nancy Spain and Miss Mary Burchell.

[Walks over to greet them]

'Hello and good evening. I'm sorry you had trouble in the studios, but here all our lights are working. Welcome to Television Theatre, Miss Nancy Spain and Miss Mary Burchell.

Thank you Miss Spain and thank you Mr Alexander Moyes for your help - and thank you Miss Mary Burchell, because This Is Your Life...

[This Is Your Life theme music plays]

This is a surprise and something of a shock, but don't let it worry you. You were to talk about romantic stories, but here in real truth we have a story more romantic than any fiction.

Please come with me now and take your place in our Chair of Honour...

[They move to centre stage]

Yes, 'This Is Your Life', Ida Cook. To make certain of getting you here at all, we've welcomed you by the name with which you've made your reputation as a novelist.

Ida Cook, whose name is inscribed on the cover of this book, is also Mary Burchell...

The story of Ida Cook is the story of a writer with an unusual and intimate link with the world of Grand Opera. This was to be the basis of the story we intended to tell. Suddenly, half-way through our investigations we hit on something far more interesting and dramatic.

A story that might have come straight from the case-book of a modern Scarlet Pimpernel: at great personal risk, you and your sister Louise delivered from the hours of Nazi persecution a company of terrified, distraught and desperate human beings..."

Walter Stiefel: [off stage]

"My mother and my father and I myself owe our lives to you Miss Cook.

Andrews:

"A voice from those grim days of 1938. But who's is it?

Yes. One of the many you saved, and one you haven't seen for many years - Walter Stiefel."

[Walter enters]

Andrews:

"You first met Miss Cook in Berlin Mr Stiefel?"

Stiefel:

"Yes. On a street corner and, believe me, it was a very dangerous thing for her to do. It was arranged for me to meet her at the station carrying an English newspaper, but they were banned on that day, and I had a Swedish newspaper. Miss Cook and I were unable to recognise each other, but later I was able to phone her and arrange the street corner meeting.

It is impossible for any of us to express adequately our gratitude to Miss Cook and her sister. But for them I do not doubt that I would have ended my life in a concentration camp. I am glad to have this opportunity of saying again; 'thank you Ida and Louise Cook'"

Andrews:

And thank you Walter Stiefel for coming down from Manchester.

[Walter takes a seat]

Andrews:

"This is not a horror story we are about to tell tonight. It is the story of two girls and of how their love of opera and the people of opera led them to situations which needed tremendous courage and an unflinching faith in humanity.

Your father was a Customs and Excise official. You were born, Miss Cook, on August 24th 1904, in a house in Croft Avenue, Sunderland, but in 1906 your family moved south to Barnes on the Thames, to this house where your brother Bill was born."

[Image of house shown]

Andrews:

"Six years later you go north again to Alnwick, Northumberland and here was the birthplace of your brother Jim."

[Image of second house shown]

Andrews:

"Finally, at the age of fifteen, you came back to Wandsworth Common, South London, where you share a happy home with your sister, your two brothers and your mother and father.

[Image of London house shown]

Andrews:

"You have said in one of your books that you cannot begin to imagine a happier family life than yours, in the whole of the British Isles, and I'm quite sure that is true. Just listen to this voice:

Louise Cook: [off stage]

"The Comte de la Fere in person wishes expressly from the other world to have the pleasure of an interview with you"

[a reference to the character Athos, one of *The Three Musketeers*, created by Alexandre Dumas and perhaps a direct reference to the Cook sisters' interest in Spiritualism]

{see <https://www.leslieflint.com/alexandre-dumas-april-1970> }

[The next page is missing from the transcript]

[Louise Cook enters and shares a memory of a childhood play*, derived from the Biblical tale from Exodus in the Old Testament, of the Israelites fleeing persecution in Egypt.

*Referred to below, by their childhood friend *Jean Cleghorn*]

Louise:

"Ida felt pity for them and wept loud and long"

Andrews:

"Perhaps there was something symbolic in Ida being so distressed about the first refugees the world ever knew?

You played a big part in this story Miss Cook, would you sit down by your sister please."

[Louise Cook takes a seat]

Andrews:

To continue - you went as a pupil to the Duchess School opposite Alnwick Castle.

Jean Cleghorn: [off stage]

"Do you remember Ida, when we set fire to the 'dents' at Warkworth?"

Andrews:

Does that voice remind you of those days?

You're right of course - a close friend of your school days, who now runs a nursing home in Newcastle on Tyne: Miss Jean Cleghorn."

[Jean enters and greets the Cook sisters]

Andrews:

"Miss Cleghorn, what's this private fire-raising joke? And what are 'dents'?"

Cleghorn:

Just grass. We decided to go for a picnic one day when Ida and Louise were staying with us at Alnwick. The last words my mother said were, 'Mind you don't set fire to the heather!'

But we missed the train for the moors and went to Warkworth Sands instead. Do you remember Ida? We put the kettle on to boil and suddenly the dry grass - the 'dents' - went up in a terrific blaze."

Andrews:

"How did you cope with that?"

Cleghorn:

"We threw sand on it and finally put the fire out. When it was all over we turned around to find my sister Meg unconcernedly lighting another fire to boil the kettle! But I shall never forget Louise, with a basket elegantly over one arm, sprinkling sand as though she were sowing seed!"

Andrews:

"How old were you at this time?"

Cleghorn:

"Twelve."

Andrews:

"And was there anything in those days that gave you an inkling of what your friend Ida Cook would do with her life?"

Cleghorn:

"She was always tremendously interested in people. Louise and she were always acting - charades and stories they made up for themselves."

Andrews:

"So you really weren't surprised when eventually she began writing books?"

Cleghorn:

"No, not a bit."

Andrews:

"Well, thanks to you, Jean Cleghorn, I think we see a little of the path the Cook's life was to take"

[Jean Cleghorn takes a seat]

Andrews: [to Ida Cook]

"The First World is over; you have left the North for good; and you are growing up in London. To be independent is one of your own greatest ambitions, and you and your sister are working in the Civil Service. Then out of the blue, something happens - something from which springs one of the ruling passions of your life. [To Louise] I think perhaps you might tell us what it was?"

Louise Cook:

"I came home one day and announced to the family, 'I want a gramophone'!"

Andrews: [to Ida]

"What made your sister so determined to own a gramophone?"

Ida Cook:

"It was after hearing a lecture on music given by Sir Henry Walford Davies"

[Image of Walford Davies shown]

Andrews:

"That famous Master of the King's Music? But surely, even in those days, gramophones were quite an expensive luxury?"

Louise Cook:

"The one I chose was £23. By a wonderful bit of luck a bonus arrived just at the right moment; and it was just enough for me to put down a deposit and buy a few records."

Andrews: [to Ida]

“And from that moment a new and abiding interest begins to colour your life - the solace, the excitement and the inspiration of great music. So what were those first records you had?”

Louise Cook:

“I was rather extravagant - I bought ten all at once. One was Bach’s ‘Air on the G String’, I remember. Only two were vocal recordings; one by Alma Gluck and the other was a new recording by an artist whose name we didn’t know - Amelita Galli-Curci.

[Image of Madame Galli-Curci shown]

Andrews:

I wish we could have had Madame Galli-Curci with us this evening, but she is now living in retirement in America.

With your ever-growing commotion of records - an the price of every one meant some sacrifice - you discover the delight, the fascination of opera.

You become a burning enthusiast and one of the faithful regulars in the Covent Garden queues. You met many good friends in those queues, where the really penetrating critics of opera are so often to be found.

By going without the things people thought important you were able to hear Alfred Piccaver, Eva Turner, Feodor Chaliapin, Joseph Hislop - and the great names of opera began to know the these two eager girls who always seemed to present on each great occasion.

And then, in the year 1924, you learn that the greatest soprano of all, Amelita Galli-Curci, is to visit London in person.”

[Image of poster: Galli-Curci sings in London shown.]

Andrews:

“You scrape and save to buy tickets for her concerts in the Albert Hall and at Alexandra Palace, which is still a concert hall: its future as a cradle of television un-guessed at.

More than anything you long to hear her as an opera singer, but you find that Galli-Curci sings opera only in New York. That fact is enough for you to start planning what, in the circumstances, seemed impossible. [To Louise] Do you remember how your sister told you of her plan?”

Louise Cook:

“Yes, she said quite simply: ‘I’m going to New York to hear Galli-Curci sing in opera. Are you coming too?’”

Andrews: [To Ida]

“What did Louise say to that?”

Ida Cook:

“She said; ‘Oh rather. But how are we going to do it?’”

Andrews: [To Ida]

“And how did you do it?”

[Ida explained how they worked out the cost of the trip, down to the last farthing. They could go to New York and back as ‘tourists’ in those days for £36 and they decided they could do the whole trip for £100 each - but it would take two years for them to save the money and meant going without

pretty well everything.]

Andrews: [To Ida]

"I wonder what Galli-Curci herself thought? Did she know of your plans?"

[Ida replied saying yes, and they had a wonderful letter saying that if they ever get to America she would get them tickets for everything she sang. And she they saw her at the Albert Hall she said they were to be sure to telephone her as soon as they arrived in New York.

Ida explained neither of them had enough money to buy suitable clothes for the opera, so they made them - with the help from patterns given away in magazines.]

[Image shown of Ida wearing an evening dress from a design from 'Mabs Fashions' magazine]

Andrews:

"Your dream comes true. You sit in the great New York Metropolitan Opera House

[Image shown of the Metropolitan Opera House]

In your home-made evening clothes, and you hear Galli-Curci, Beniamino Gigli and Giuseppe De Luca in 'La Traviata'.

You are welcomed backstage after the performance and the great prima-donna invites you to stay with her next time you go to America. The first of the many international stars whom you now count among your personal friends.

Back in London you heard Rosa Ponselle make her debut at Covent Garden in Bellini's 'Norma'. That was on May 28th 1929 and even now that date has a special significance, hasn't it?"

[Ida explains that they telephone Rosa Ponselle on that date each year at her home in Maryland.]

Andrews:

"Knowing your close friendship with Miss Ponselle, we told her only last night that you were to be on our stage tonight, and she recorded this message for you at her home in Maryland."

[Recording played]

Andrews:

"That was quite a surprise. But time hurries on and we have more surprises to come. The young girl from Northumberland who became a copy-typist in Whitechapel is a very different person now.

You have crossed the Atlantic more than once, mixed on equal terms with artists of high renown, you think no more of crossing and re-crossing Europe than of taking the last bus home. We all know this sort of thing is an expensive pastime.

How did you do it? Well, here is someone who can supply the answer...

Miss Taft: [Off stage]

Have you got your copy ready Ida?

Andrews:

"Do you know who that is?"

[Ida responds in the positive.]

Andrews:

Right: the name is Miss Florence Taft, now Mrs Logge, of New Southgate, London."

[Miss Taft enters]

Andrews:

"I believe it's to Miss Taft that you owe the beginnings of your career as a writer. Is that true?"

[Ida responds in the positive.]

Andrews:

"How did that come about Miss Taft?"

Miss Taft:

"You'll remember how when Ida went to New York she made her clothes on the advice given by a magazine?"

Andrews:

"Yes I do."

Miss Taft:

"I was the editor of that magazine and I believe I bought the first article Ida ever had published.

She very sensibly thought it would be a good idea to tell our readers how she had made an evening dress from one of the patterns and she wore it at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York..."

Andrews:

"And you kept in touch with your new contributor?"

Miss Taft:

"Yes. She wrote more articles about life in the country in Northumberland, and then another describing her visit to Madame Galli-Curci in the Catskill Mountains. I liked Ida's style, and when the paper was re-organised, I offered her a job as sub-editor."

Andrews:

"And she leapt at it?"

Miss Taft:

"Hardly. She was very taken aback and said, 'Yes, but I'm in the Civil Service, and so are my father and my sister. There's the pension and I'm safe until I'm nailed down in my coffin!' But eventually she thought it over and took the job."

Andrews:

"And your hunch turned out to have been a good one?"

Miss Taft:

"Yes. One day I persuaded her to write a short story, which we printed, and then a serial. It was later published as a novel."

Andrews: [To Ida]

"And the title?"

Ida Cook:

"It was called 'Wife to Christopher'."

[Image of book cover shown]

Andrews:

This then was volume one in the Mary Burchell library, followed up very quickly by a second novel, 'Call and I'll Come.'

[Image of book cover shown]

Andrews: [To Miss Taft]

"You'd found a novelist, but lost a sub-editor!"

Miss Taft:

Yes. Both books were successful and Ida soon had a contract for four books a year.

Andrews: [To Ida]

"Which meant that your much-prized independence became a reality. Thank you Miss Taft."

[Miss Taft takes a seat.]

Andrews: [To Ida]

"And now, in 1934, a new voice marks the opening of the most exciting chapter of your life."

Madame Viorica Krauss-Ursuleac: [off stage]

"Have you still got that famous snap of me Ida?"

Andrews:

"I think you must know who this is?"

It is indeed your friend, the widow of conductor Clemens Krauss: Madame Viorica Krauss-Ursuleac!

[Madame Ursuleac enters]

Andrews:

"Madame Ursuleac has come here tonight especially to be with you, from her home in Ehrwald in the Austrian Tyrol. And this - if I am not mistaken - is what she referred to as 'that famous snap'..."

[Image of Clemens Krauss and Madame Ursuleac shown]

Andrews:

"Do you recall when that picture was taken Madame Ursuleac?"

Madame Ursuleac:

"Very well. And after we had become good friends we would often talk about it and laugh. My husband had come to London in 1934 to conduct the new Strauss opera 'Arabella' in which I was to sing. Ida was then just one of the girls in the queue outside the Opera House."

Andrews:

"What happened?"

[Ida explains that she was in the queue for the Opera House on Floral Street at Covent Garden, when someone pointed out that Clemens Krauss was nearby. She persuaded a friend to ask him for his autograph and took the opportunity of taking his photograph.]

Andrews:

"Was it a success?"

Madame Ursuleac:

"No. The photo didn't come out very well. But later I persuaded my husband to pose with me, so that Ida could take a picture of the two of us together."

Andrews: [To Ida]

"And that was the 'famous snap'. So another of, what one might call, your international friendships beings."

Madame Ursuleac:

Yes, I am happy to say we were to meet again many times."

Andrews:

Thank you so much Madame Ursuleac for coming along this evening. Please take a seat here.

[Madame Ursuleac takes a seat]

Andrews:

"The years go by and to the long list of your friends, among the international stars of opera, are added the names of Ezio Pinzo, Elizabeth Rethburg, Giovanni Martinelli, Richard Tauber and Lawrence Tibbett. The money you earn your books means that you can travel when and where you will - but an insidious change is taking place in Europe.

A year or two after the murder of Engelbert Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor, you are asked by your good friends; Clemens Krauss and his wife Madame Ursuleac, to 'look after' a lady called Frau Mayer-Lismann and her family. The Mayer-Lismanns, as it turns out, became the first refugees who had you to thank for their preservation.

[On-screen are shown the following news headlines & images: 'Nazis Lash Britain Again' headline - Joseph Goebbels at the microphone photo - a smashed shop window photo - Joseph Goebbels in uniform photo - 'Night Orgy of Looting' headline - a synagogue photo - Joseph Goebbels with troops photo]

Andrews:

"Gradually in your travels you see the terror of Nazi persecution as the hideous, inhuman menace it is. All around you, men, women and children, by the hundreds of thousands, have one thought: to get out before they are engulfed by a tide of blood and torture. Do we need to be reminded now of the bestiality, the misery and the murder that went on in places that you had known only as cities of light and gaiety and melody?

Early in 1938, Austria is invaded. Later in the same year come the threat to Czechoslovakia. In November the fuse is touched off. A young Jew...

[On-screen are shown the following images and news headline: *Jewish boy photo* - 'Shot Nazi Envoy Dies' headline - *Jew with placard* image.]

Andrews:

"... shoots a Nazi official and the hatred for the Jews is revealed in a crescendo of stark horror. The order goes out that every male Jew between the ages of sixteen and eighty is to be rounded up and sent to a concentration camp.

Ida Cook, This is Your Life and I had no option but to recall these harrowing moments...

[The next page is missing from the transcript]

[This is the point in Ida's story where she and her sister Louise chose to hear the cases of people who wanted their help to leave Germany.]

Andrews:

"... of tragic, agonising interviews. You meet hundreds of frantic mothers, daughters and sisters - in a room which later on was used by a priest, secretly, to administer the last rites to people doomed to deportation and death.

Time and again you fly to the Continent; to all appearances a couple of well-to-do Englishwomen with a passion for opera. In reality, you are the target for frantic appeals by men and women who know that if they can't get out of Germany - and at once - they will die.

Some you are able to help. The London flat you use for your work becomes a clearing-house for your refugees. But how did you manage to escape suspicion? Was it because you had your own agents over there - and sympathies among your musical friends?"

[Ida explains that she had invaluable help from Clemens Krauss and his wife. She told Krauss when she and Louise would have to come to Germany. He would tell them which operas he was presenting on those days, with details of the cast. Sometimes he would even be able to let them choose their own operas!]

Andrews:

"I see. So that you could explain why you made so many short trips to the Continent and so frequently. You would know all the details of the various performances and could pass merely as eccentric opera-lovers who would never miss some special production. What would be the procedure?"

[Ida explains that they would leave on Friday evening and dash to Croydon to catch the last plane to Cologne. They'd be in Cologne by 9.30pm the same evening, then catch the night train to Munich. They'd stopped off at Frankfurt - that's where most of their cases were - and return through Holland.]

Andrews:

And so it comes about that your three worlds merge and give you the means of carrying out your work of mercy and compassion. There is this...

[The next page is missing from the transcript]

[... Ida remembers that this was a Polish boy from Zbaszyn, who arrived in London on the last boat to leave Poland after the Germans crossed the border in September 1939.]

Andrews: [to Ida]

"After adventures like these it wouldn't have been surprising if the war itself came to you as something of an anti-climax. But no one will be surprised that you were among the first to volunteer for war-work. You became a shelter warden in Bermondsey."

Alice Foscett: [off stage]

"How about a cup of something nice and hot Ida?"

Andrews:

*"It's quite a while since you heard that friendly voice...
A first aid nurse from that shelter under the factory: Miss Alice Foscett."*

[Alice Foscett enters]

Andrews: [to Miss Foscett]

"Do you remember our friend here?"

Miss Foscett:

I should say I do. I remember her popping her head through the curtains the very first time I saw her. She'd come down three or four times a week as Shelter Warden. She was a real brick - always smiling."

Andrews: [to Miss Foscett]

"You had it pretty rough down there in Bermondsey?"

Miss Foscett:

"Yes, but we were lucky. One night a bomb dropped right through the factory above us, and landed near our first aid shelter. But it didn't go off, thank goodness."

[To Ida]: *Do you remember the night Alf Little came downstairs one night and thought there was someone following him?"*

[Ida nods]

Miss Foscett:

"When he got to the bottom he looked around and found it was an incendiary bomb bumping down the stairs after him!"

Andrews:

*"So incendiary bombs were all in the day's work to you people.
Thank you Miss Foscett for helping us."*

[Miss Foscett takes a seat.]

Andrews: [to Ida]

"Your own home in Barnes is wrecked, but I'm glad to say that all your family survived the war. When it is all over you find yourself even more firmly established as a popular novelist – and in 1947 you fly to New York with your sister and arrive twenty years to the day after you first set foot in the city. And it was on this visit that you met another great friend - the famous operatic and concert star whose story of courage was filmed in the picture 'Interrupted Melody' and made her the centre of This Is Your Life in America - Miss Marjorie Lawrence."

Here now is a reminder that the war had not made people forget the risks you took in those earlier

days.”

Stanley Black: [off stage]

“I’d like to make you a fur coat, because no one in the world deserves it more than you do.”

Andrews:

“Do you remember that voice Miss Cook?”

[Ida responds]

Andrews:

“It certainly is – Mr Stanley Black”

[Stanley Black enters]

Andrews:

“Now, Mr Black, when Ida Cook came to you to order a fur coat, you recognised her name. Will you tell me why that was?”

Mr Black:

“It was all because I had heard about all she had done for the Jewish people, and felt so tremendously grateful. She had risked capture and imprisonment and perhaps torture, to save the lives of people she had hardly met - and a fur coat was to be my way of showing a little of my appreciation.”

Andrews:

“But even then I believe she insisted on paying for the coat?”

Mr Black:

“Yes. She wouldn’t hear of it as a gift, but I managed to take the price down, without her knowing.”

Andrews:

“Thank you Stanley Black.”

[Stanley Black takes a seat]

Andrews:

“Our story is almost told, but here I want to anticipate a little. Your love for humanity at large, Miss Cook, must always send you looking for a new cause to champion. The talk you were to make in our studios this evening caused you to postpone a visit to Landshut in Bavaria. Whom would you have seen there Miss Cook?”

[Ida replies: ‘John Slade’]

Andrews:

“And John Slade, a member of the Society of Friends, is working among the displaced persons in a camp out there. Is that so?”

[Ida confirms this]

Andrews:

“We’re sorry to have upset your arrangements Miss Cook, but at least we shan’t have delayed your meeting with Mr Slade, because you can meet him for the first time, and on this programme.”

[John Slade enters]

Andrews:

“Will you tell us something about this camp Mr Slade? How many displaced persons do you care for?”

Mr Slade:

“About twelve hundred, half of them living in an old barracks. They come from sixteen different countries.”

Andrews:

“And what, generally speaking, is their state of health?”

Mr Slade:

“All of them are unfit. TB mainly, due to the privations and strain of forced labour. All the fit ones have emigrated, but the great problem with those who remain, is to make them feel 'wanted'.

Andrews: [to Ida]

“And how would you tackle a problem like that Miss Cook?”

[Ida explains that her idea would be to get each family 'adopted' by people who will correspond with them and send them parcels, etc.]

Andrews:

“Thank you Mr Slade.”

[Mr Slade takes a seat]

Andrews:

“We have come to the end of our story, but before we say goodbye I want to remind you of another goodbye, spoken in a darkened room in Frankfurt. You were here in London late on the night of August 24th 1939 - your birthday - when the telephone rang.”

[The sound effect of a phone is heard ringing]

[Andrews: quietly]

“Would you answer the phone please Miss Cook?”

[Ida picks up the phone] {presumably a TV prop situated beside her?}

Frau Jack: [off stage]

“Ida, there is one more. A young man and his wife. Is it possible? They have only one more week.”

Andrews:

“Does that voice hold memories for you Ida Cook?”

[Ida responds in the affirmative and puts down the phone.]

Andrews:

“It is indeed, Frau Jack, who has come back into your life from Zurich.”

[Frau Jack enters.]

Andrews:

“Frau Jack, I believe, acted as your agent in Frankfurt?”

[Ida responds in the affirmative.]

Andrews:

“And wasn't it in your house in Frankfurt, Frau Jack, that Miss Cook interviewed so many of these unfortunate people?”

Frau Jack:

“Yes, it was in my house in Arndtstrasse. When Miss Cook and her sister were coming to Frankfurt I would arrange for all these poor people to be interviewed by her there.”

Andrews: [to Ida]

“And there was something specially dramatic about that telephone call wasn't there?”

[Ida explains that it was the last telephone call she had from Germany]

Andrews: [to Frau Jack]

“What was the purpose of that call?”

Frau Jack:

“It was my last request for her to help someone. But in my heart I knew it was too late. We just said, 'Goodbye' and we added 'for a long time.'”

Andrews:

“And it is with that memory of those bitter times and of the courage with which you two sisters helped so many to survive them, that we end our story. Our guest this evening began her working life as many others have done and are still doing - as a typist in a government office. But such is her love for humanity and her eagerness to translate that love into positive action that, as we have seen, a great number of people are happier today - just because of her.

I personally would wish to say how proud I am to have met her. So that you may look back on this evening, we hope with pleasure, may I ask you to accept this book, because 'This Is Your Life' – Ida Cook.”

[End]